

This is my mark ... this is man

Could Britain be on the verge of discovering a painted cave on a par with Lascaux in France? Jonathan Jones embarks on an underground odyssey - beginning in Wales

Jonathan Jones

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We could be a forensics team investigating a murder. Gloved hands carefully raise a human shin bone, then part of a pelvis, out of plastic trays. What sends a shiver through my spine, quite apart from the spooky walk along a dark corridor to this subterranean office at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, is the startling fact that all these fragments of a human skeleton have been painted red. It is a red just like dried blood, as if someone wanted to paint the colour of living flesh on these dry remains. If they were the remains of a modern murder victim, we'd clearly be looking for a spectacularly strange serial killer who de-fleshed his victims, then gorily coloured the bones. In fact, this young man died some 30,000 years ago.

I shudder with recognition. Recently, I stood in a cave deep inside a French hillside contemplating a human hand depicted in that exact same red - though better preserved, brighter and bloodier, deep underground. It is red ochre, a naturally occurring iron oxide and a favourite pigment of the earliest painters. These reddened bones in Cardiff are precious clues in an archaeological detective story that has only just begun.

What I am about to reveal should astonish you as it has astonished me: somewhere beneath our feet, under the fields and woodlands of Britain, a painted cave as great as the ice age art treasures of Chauvet and Lascaux may be waiting to be discovered.

This claim will be made by a museum this week, for the first time, when a new archaeology gallery opens at the National Museum of Wales. It will display this precious skeleton, Britain's oldest known human remains, misleadingly called The Red Lady of Paviland. Alongside it will be images of painted horses and lions from Chauvet, the world's oldest known painted caves, whose art has also been dated to around 30,000 years ago. (By comparison, Stonehenge is a mere 5,000 years old.) The display will ask: "Is there cave art in Wales?" Until recently, no one believed there was anything of the sort, not only in Wales but anywhere in Britain. That is, at least, until a discovery in a Midlands cave in 2003.

You put on a hard hat, climb down the scaffolding, and go carefully into the tunnel, picking out by torch what might be animal shapes on the wet limestone walls. Then you stop in front of two curving shapes, and here there's no ambiguity: they were clearly incised by a human hand. In fact, they were engraved about 13,000 years ago. Are they birds? Or perhaps, as one researcher thinks, stylised nudes?

The imagination aroused, you start to see animals in every shadow. Every protrusion or recess becomes significant. A stag, a horse's head, and, most astonishing of all, an ibis with a long curved beak, sculpted in powerful relief. It's a mysterious and dreamlike experience. Art actually forms itself out of the stone. Reality and imagination become one.

This is Church Hole cave at Creswell Crags on the border of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. It is a low, silent, water-filled gorge whose caves have long been known to have been sites of early habitation. In 2003, archaeologists noticed something odd in Church Hole: animal engravings, made by an Ice Age hunter. Along with the red-coloured skeleton in Wales, Creswell Crags is a clue to a mystery: are there cave paintings in Britain?

In search of an answer, I find myself hiking into the village of Cabrerets in the Lot region of southwestern France. Sheep stare at me, a rare visitor; modern houses back up against overhanging limestone cliffs. In the wooded hill above the village is one of the most richly decorated and spectacular caves ever discovered: Pech-Merle, whose paintings were found by teenagers in 1922.

Not all the caves in which early humans made paintings are geologically spectacular. This one is. Among the twisting pinnacles and petrified fountains, as of some subterranean, inverted cathedral, something human materialises: someone has placed a hand on a gigantic boulder and spat red pigment around it. The result, a fiery halo around the hand's silhouette, looks so fresh that it could have been stencilled yesterday. Yet the art in this cave is 25,000 years old, among the oldest pictures known, made in a cold landscape dominated by long-extinct mammals, a lost world we know from the occasional discovery of a frozen mammoth in Siberian ice - and from these pictures, made by our ancestors.

Out of the stone, an animal materialises: shaggy, immense, hunched. It seems to have no face, no eyes, just a tangle of matted hair that falls down in sweeping black lines. This is a portrayal of a woolly mammoth. It is one thing to see mammoth fossils in museums; this is like meeting a living one. It seems so vividly, scarily alive not just because it has been so accurately drawn, but because of the intense feeling the artist has communicated. If I had to compare this with modern art, I'd think of the expressionist animal paintings of Franz Marc, or Picasso's depiction of the Minotaur. The mammoth in Pech-Merle shares with these works a deep imaginative engagement with nature, a mythic embrace of the visible world - an expression of mind.

In Pech-Merle, the first things that astonish you are the mineral formations. Some people might even find the paintings disappointing in comparison, if you look at them only as spectacle - and therein lies the fundamental difference between nature and art. Nature impresses as an object; art fascinates as the product of human imagination. What makes the red hand and the black mammoth in Pech-Merle so beguiling is the proof that a conscious mind and a responsive imagination came down to this place, so long ago.

I feel amazement at the picture of that mammoth because the human who drew it felt amazement at a living mammoth. You can see the artist's awe in every line. To leave out the mammoth's eye, to lose its face in a mass of hair - these are masterstrokes. Cave paintings are imaginative, intellectual responses to a long-gone world; they are fossils of emotion. Archaeologists believe that some kind of magical or religious purpose must have driven ancient hunters to clamber deep into dangerous caves with only blazing torches or animal-fat lamps in order to draw, engrave and paint among the stalactites. The first attempts to explain cave art hypothesised that it was "hunting magic", that by painting a mammoth the hunter hoped to have power over it. This view is discredited; some archaeologists now believe that early artists were shamans, whose paintings record trances in which they communed with animals.

Nature is immense down here. I can feel the weight of the hill above me. Surely this sense, of being dwarfed by stone, mirrors the early hunters' sense of being dwarfed by mammoths at a time when the homo sapiens population was tiny. Imagine coming down here with just a feeble flame. You would never see the entire space, just flickering glimpses. The Pech-Merle hand is placed in a spectacular natural location, with the void of the underworld beyond; it is like a flag left on the moon. Coming deep underground was like sailing the seas. These artists were the first explorers.

When did art begin? The moment an ancestor of humans carried home a nice-looking pebble? Or 1.5m years ago, when our apish predecessors started making symmetrical stone handaxes? And yet there is a world of difference between a cave painting and a hewn stone. To define this difference is to define ourselves.

In Pech-Merle, there is one painting that does not seem anchored to anything material. Its misty, levitating ethereality may have something to do with the way it was created, probably by spitting paint from the mouth without actually touching the rock. It has been painted on a smooth surface with one startling natural curiosity: a curving outcrop that looks like a horse's head. As if inspired by this quirk, the artist painted two big, dappled horses with shaded heads, overlapping and back to back.

Anyone would recognise them as horses, yet they are superbly stylised. Their heads are tiny black triangles at the end of tapering necks, their legs slender narrow stilts. They make me think of early ceramic sculptures. No wonder the artist made handmarks all around, as if to authenticate a proud achievement. These horses seem like ghosts in the stone: the artist has exploited the fact that the right-hand edge of the rock face ends in a shape exactly like a horse's head, and has fitted the narrow painted head inside it. It's as if the shape of this rock has generated the art, as if the imagination fed on geology.

The leap this represents in human creativity is undeniable. A symmetrical stone tool obviously shows traits we call human, but chimpanzees can make tools, too - and no chimpanzee ever drew a convincing horse. The scientist Jacob Bronowski said that cave art "looked along the ascent of man. All over these caves, the print of the hand says, 'This is my mark. This is man.'" The horse painting displays the capacity to at once observe and abstract from nature - that is, the capacity to create style - that makes the subsequent history of art so varied. You might almost say that this art, made so long before the invention of cities, is civilised.

The walk to Cougnac cave, 30 miles west of Pech-Merle, leads through a medieval town and a long-settled countryside. To enter the cave is to enter an alien world, utterly remote from the tended fields. You come to an unearthly frieze in which animals stand suspended: a giant deer, a ram, and - well, what are those two figures? One is just the lower part of a human, running away, with three lines that look like spears stuck in its back. The other has a human body and a bestial head, and has been impaled by four spears.

Cave art is famous for its depictions of animals. Yet the human form appears repeatedly in the caves of this part of France: drawings of women with exaggerated breasts at Pech-Merle; images of wounded humans with animal heads at Cougnac. The art seems to question who we are: part of the herds, or standing apart and observing them? If not beasts, then what?

When they make handprints, these early humans declare that they are the thinking, creating animal. This art records the dawn of human self-consciousness. Mammoths don't paint pictures; in portraying them, you portray your own power - the unique human power to observe, remember, and imagine.

I said this was a detective story, and it is. Patriotism aside, it is about more than the quest for British cave paintings. I believe that such paintings will be found, especially after seeing how much art the first fully human people to migrate from Africa left deep in the landscape of France. Yet, to search for this art is dangerous. We may find more than we bargained for, closer to home than we ever dreamt.

The limestone gorge and long quiet lake of Creswell Crags sits today in a mild English landscape, but it was once at the very border of human discovery. Creswell Crags is, by far, the deepest into north-west Europe that cave art has been found. Any further north and our ancestors would have hit an impenetrable ice sheet. Hunters who came this far were braving the edges of possibility. It was like being on a space station in a remote galaxy. The explorers made their report, engraving on the cave roof what they had found. Why? To prove to themselves that they were not just animals but something more - that they did not look dumbly, as the dark-eyed passive mammal herds, but could think about what they saw, tell stories about it.

Art exists to be talked about, to be liked and disliked. These people were the first art critics as well as the first artists. These paintings were something to chat about on the cold, cold nights at Creswell Crags. Making art and talking about it meant belonging to a new kind of group - not a herd, but a culture, just as art in our culture is, fundamentally, a form of social interaction. Perhaps going with friends to Tate Modern is not so different from huddling round a drawing of a mammoth.

I can't think of these artists as "primitive". Their hands were like yours and mine, as were their joys and sorrows. Down in the village of Cabrerets, modern humans have made homes, civilisation. And yet the darkness of the human story is apparent: a plaque on an old house pays tribute to a villager who died "pour la France" in Buchenwald. If cave art is the dawn of culture, it also contains the earliest images of violence. Who are those impaled semi-humans?

Cave art represents a quantum shift in consciousness: the moment human beings start to look at nature as something separate from themselves - with wonder and with a ruthless capacity to dominate the environment. We know now, as the world heats, how dangerous we are. Cave art is the self-portrait of earth's most destructive and creative animal. It is a subterranean mirror, a black lake underground that reflects the pride, brilliance and dark ambition of the armed hunter among the hapless herds. And the clues that are gathering - the engraved animals at Creswell, the red skeleton in Wales - are bringing this dark mirror home.